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ABSTRACT

A case study of school-university collaboration between Starkville School District (Mississippi) and Mississippi State University (MSU) explored the process of collaboration and the ingredients for successful implementation. MSU offered grant opportunities for university faculty to work with local school district personnel. Starkville School district was seeking assistance to enhance the district's public relations with a view to launching a bond issue campaign. A committee consisting of university faculty and district personnel developed a grant proposal for community marketing and communication aimed at building coalitions for public education that included five major goals to improve the programs and image of the district schools. Surveys, focus groups, a 24-hour call-in line and 2 newsletters were planned to provide measurement, information dissemination and gathering, and increased and better coordination of publicity. The grant development and subsequent bond campaign involved multiple levels of collaboration between district, community, and MSU personnel. For example, local community groups and agencies provided information and advice during the grant writing phase and the principal grant investigator worked extensively with the bond referendum campaign steering committee before that campaign began. Overall outcomes from the collaboration have been positive, especially the successful passage of the bond issue which won 65 percent of the vote. (JB)

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School University Collaboration: A Case Study

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Unique Collaboration Developed Between University and Public Schools

Introduction - Importance of Collaboration

Collaboration between public institutions is a positive social process. Everyone appears to be in favor of collaboration as an abstract concept. School and college partnerships have experienced extraordinary growth over the past 15 years.[1] A recent ERIC search produced 2,688 citations on the broad topic of university-school collaboration.[2] Unfortunately, personalities, territorial issues and the competition for funds often erode collaborative efforts. Consequently, negative stereotypes have evolved that further limit collaboration. Critics of higher education assume that university faculty are largely removed from the real world and have little to offer local school districts. Many of these critics are fellow educators, but the feeling is widespread.

A recent study of university-school collaboration at Mississippi's eight public institutions is very encouraging for those who appreciate the value of collaboration. This study by the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Education (IHL) was conducted to determine the extent of current collaborative partnerships in Mississippi. The 1993 study found that Mississippi university faculty were involved in 435 collaborative programs with the public schools. These programs generated more that $20,000,000 in external funds. Perhaps even more profound, the collaborative projects provided services to 470,092 students during the 1993-94 academic year.[3] This study indicates the breadth of university-school collaboration and disproves the myth of university isolation. However, the IHL study indicated the need for further documentation of the collaboration process. Context rich case studies are especially needed to help us better understand the process of collaboration and the ingredients of successful implementation. The following case study illustrates what can be accomplished when people of good will from schools and universities work together toward common goals.

School Community Relations/Public Relations/Marketing/Communication

The fields of public relations, marketing, communication, and school-community relations are very diverse and hold many specific meanings to different individuals. However, various definitions indicate comprehensive functions of all these areas and imply the importance of coordinating these efforts. "Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends."[4] "Marketing is the management function that identifies human needs and wants, offers products and services to satisfy those demands, and causes transactions that deliver products and services in exchange for something of value to the provider."[5] ". . . communication is a cooperative enterprise requiring the mutual interchange of ideas and information, and out of which understanding develops and action is taken."[6]

The successes of any efforts in public relations, marketing, and communication are dependent upon quality programs and services to promote. "An image reflects that which is: No public relations program can make a bad school look good for very long."[7]

Other authors have defined the overall relationship building function for schools as "School-Community Relations." The overall element here is the identification of positive outcomes of student and school employee activities and the involvement of community and parents to create positive learning environments. Public relations incorporates areas of promoting understand of educational goals and building public support. Marketing identifies the wants and needs of internal and external publics and creates or maintains services and products consistent with desires of these publics.[8]

Nine activities or group relationships have been further identified that relate directly to student achievement and staff effectiveness. Presence of these would indicate that positive school-community relations activities are being enacted by the district: partnerships, surveys/polls, senior citizen involvement, advisory committees, parent involvement, volunteers, achievement recognition, positive internal relations and climate, and building coalitions/consensus.[9] The following grant and/or bond issue campaign included elements of all of the above.

Grant Preparation for School-University Collaboration

One of the authors frequently discussed the overall importance of public relations and the related areas of school-community relations and marketing in the Starkville School District during the 1993-1994 school year with the kindergarten principal where his son attended school. He was a concerned parent of a kindergartner who had been very impressed during his limited contact with the local public schools. The two agreed an overall public relations program for the schools was very important. The kindergarten won a National Blue Ribbon that year, so public relations concepts and strategies were in the minds of many school officials, parents, and community members.

During the fall of 1994, Mississippi State University provided grant opportunities through a new Public School Partnership Program for university faculty to work with local school district personnel. The county has two school districts: Starkville and Oktibbeha County. This comprehensive public relations program focused only on the city district.

After discussing the initial idea of enhancing the school district's public relations and related areas with the former kindergarten principal, who had now become director of the city

school district's family-centered programs, a committee of university faculty was developed to work with her in developing the proposal. Included in the committee were three professors from education, one from marketing, and the principal investigator, who teaches public relations courses in a communication department.

The title of the proposal was "A Model Community Marketing and Communication Program: Building Coalitions for Public Education." The terms of marketing and communication were used because the committee felt some citizens might not appreciate the term public relations. If the grant were awarded, attempts would be made to educate many internal and external publics about the realities of public relations through various activities and outcomes.

The grant committee developed five major overlapping goals to improve the programs and image of the Starkville Public Schools.

1. To conduct internal and external research through focus groups and surveys to determine perceptions of the public schools by various publics. This research would determine the most pressing educational issues to be discussed in later forums.

2. To develop an integrated public relations, marketing, and communication plan to improve the functions and image of local public schools. Elements would include both internal and external communication and incoming and outgoing communication.

3. Initiate new and coordinate existing support groups for the public schools. Determine how each group contributes and how elements could be better coordinated and enhanced to assist with the overall strategic plan for the schools. Produce satisfied consumers of the public schools who feel they have a definite impact on the positive outcomes of school activities.

4. Upon completion of the grant, see that successful elements of the program continued in a coordinated fashion by a person or department responsible for communication, marketing, public relations, and related areas. Committee members could continue to advise the person or department as needed.

5. To impact long-term improvements in attitude change about the public schools by all targeted publics. These attitude changes should lead to changes in behavior concerning enrollment in the public schools, personal and financial support and involvement with the public schools, and overall improvement of the educational experience for all students.

Many of these goals are long term and difficult to measure, but the methods included in the grant proposal could directly assist in providing information to school officials. This information could in turn provide the necessary guidelines for administrators to determine changes needed to meet desired long-term goals. Surveys directed toward students, parents, school personnel, and community members were developed as one method of encouraging more incoming communication. A focus group was also proposed to obtain feedback. Another method for potential incoming communication was installation of a 24-hour telephone call-in line. Major outgoing communication ideas included an increase and better coordination of publicity and production of two newsletters to be distributed throughout the district.

From the 45 submitted, this grant proposal was 1 of the 10 chosen for funding in November. Plans were made to fully implement the strategies of the public relations program during the spring semester.

Multiple Levels of Collaboration Thorough Grant and Bond Campaign

This grant effort and an ensuing bond referendum campaign were unique because collaborations were employed at many levels. First, the grant committee consisted of five university faculty from three different colleges or schools (Arts and Sciences, Business and Industry, and Education) and four departments (Communication; Educational Leadership; Marketing, Quantitative Analysis and Business Law; and Technology & Education). These faculty and administrators have extensive experience in public relations, communication, marketing, and various educational research methods related to public schools. The coalitions element has been researched extensively by one of the committee members and was an important element of the overall program. Another committee member serves as an administrator in a public schools research organization located in the university, so his expertise with both university and public school research and policies proved vital.

The public school contact's teaching and administrative experiences were vital to the success of the grant proposal and the ensuing activities. Her effective uses of public relations tactics were natural links for the goals of the project. For example, during her tenure as kindergarten principal, she regularly sent cards to parents of newborns at the local hospital welcoming these new additions. She was planting the seed for these parents to start thinking about where these children would attend kindergarten six years later. This is one example of her emphasis on long-term planning, an element so vital for public relations effectiveness.

While writing the grant proposal, information and advice were provided to the committee by the Starkville School District, the Starkville Area Chamber of Commerce, the Starkville Visitors and Convention Council, the Oktibbeha County Economic Development Authority,

Oktibbeha County Hospital, Parents for Public Schools, and the Starkville Foundation for Public Education. Letters of support for the project were also included from each of these organizations.

Three paid public relations interns were included as a vital element of the grant. Applications letters and resumes were submitted to a sub-committee of the principal investigator, the superintendent, the administrative assistant, and the public school contact for the grant. This sub-committee then selected the five to be interviewed. After in-depth interviews with at least three of the sub-committee members, the three interns were selected. Two were seniors and one was a junior. The two senior level students were excellent students, and one already had extensive internship experience. The junior student had completed his basic communication courses, but just started his specific public relations curriculum. However, he had worked extensively on a successful bond referendum campaign as a student government leader in high school in another city. This student further learned about school public relations and bond issues specifically because his father served on the bond referendum steering committee in that city.

As grant activities unfolded, the committee and interns continued to work with previously mentioned administrators. Additional administrators (including principals), teachers, secretaries, and other staff of the school district also contributed time and advice to various elements of the projects.

The efforts of the grant were for overall public relations for the entire district. However, many of the grant activities started focusing on the bond issue as it became the major issue during that time frame for the district. There were elements of the grant that focused on the bond issue, and there were separate events and activities promoting the bond issue that did not involve the

grant specifically. Many of the same people were involved with both efforts. This collaboration provided for more consistent and compatible messages for both the grant program and the bond referendum campaign.

The grant principal investigator worked with the bond referendum campaign steering committee from November until the vote passed May 9. The time period of November-April was spent in researching what had been done by other districts, in planning this specific campaign, and in organizing and mobilizing support before the kick-off rally in early April.

Calls were made by numerous people to other superintendents, former students who work in school public relations, colleagues in professional organizations, and recommended experts in other cities who had all worked on bond campaigns. The superintendent, the bond steering committee chair, and the principal investigator also made a trip to a nearby city to gain recommendations from a former steering committee chair there who had recently spearheaded a successful bond campaign. Once a great deal of information had been gathered from these other sources, the principal investigator developed a list of potential strategies for a Public Relations Committee to perform. Potential members of this committee were contacted and several initial meetings were held. Approximately 43 of the 52 potential members identified early in this process became actively involved. These committee members then recruited additional assistants throughout the campaign. Each member of the Public Relations Committee was then assigned to at least one sub-committee: Strategic Planning, Publications and Promotional Items, Publicity (media specific), Special Events and Personal Contacts, and Advertising. The principal investigator and the Strategic Planning Sub-Committee worked to coordinate efforts between the above sub-committees and other general committees that were being developed. Development of

the Public Relations Committee was enhanced because the principal investigator teaches public relations courses and many former students were working professionals in the area. These colleagues, several of whom also graduated from Starkville High School, were eager to help in the bond effort for their alma mater. In addition, through involvement in professional organizations, community organizations, and teaching a communication internship course, the principal investigator knew many local public relations, marketing, and media contacts who were asked to serve on this committee. Many talented people donated much time and expertise to the bond referendum campaign.

As the Public Relations Committee was being formed, the superintendent, assistant superintendent, administrative assistant and others were preparing lists of members for other committees: School District, Chamber of Commerce, Ministerial Association, Small Business, Industry, Parents for Public Schools, PTA, Retired Citizens, Institutions of Banking and Finance, City Government, Public Housing, Apartment Owners, MSU and MS Extension Service, Fine Arts, Phone Bank, Transportation, and Oktibbeha County Hospital. Specific activities were listed for each committee as a starting point, although no committee was limited by the list. Meetings were held to inform these committee heads of their functions and overall goals. Committee members were encouraged to recruit as many people as possible for each of these committees. Many of these committees overlapped, and some people were on several committees. Each of these committees then began to have separate meetings and form sub-committees to complete tasks they felt needed to be accomplished.

The Public Relations Committee worked with each of these groups as much as possible to provide materials and coordination between committees. A major goal from the beginning of this

committee organizational effort was to have as many people involved as possible. The rationale was that if someone became involved on a committee they would probably vote yes, encourage other people to vote yes, and in the long-term become more involved with the schools.

Through encouragement of these committees, other organizations (community groups, businesses, schools, Parents for Public Schools, etc.) bought advertising on their own to support the bond issue. Committee members and community leaders worked with a professional media director from a local church to develop a promotional video tape that was later edited to become a television spot. An art professor designed logos to be used for the bond campaign. Radio spots were also produced by local media leaders. Billboards were bought for three prime local locations. Numerous media interviews were held with campaign leaders throughout the campaign. Bumper sticker, buttons, lapel buttons, yard signs and posters, and fact sheets were produced by members of the bond Public Relations Committee. Through encouragement of these groups and individuals, many community members were persuaded to write letters to the editor and appear in television editorials produced and shown by a local cable channel. The same cable company also produced a live call-in show featuring the superintendent, a board member, and a parent to answer community questions about the bond issue.

A kick-off rally attended by approximately 600 people showed the overwhelming support of the bond referendum specifically and the schools in general. The event acted as a catalyst, as was hoped by the committees, to encourage people to become informed about why the money was needed. Attendees were also encouraged to persuade others to vote yes.

A prime example of effective collaboration occurred during the "yellow ribbon campaign" of the bond issue. A teacher and PTA president separately suggested to the principal investigator

that a yellow ribbon campaign could be effective to demonstrate to the community how many people were in support of the bond. Yellow ribbons could be tied on mailboxes, car antennas, trees, etc. The principal investigator shared the idea with the steering committee. One of the steering committee members then contacted a local business supporter who sold construction tape/ribbon to the committee for a very low rate. Ribbons were distributed at schools, at meetings, and through a special promotional band concert held downtown to kick off the yellow ribbon campaign a few days prior to the vote. Local media covered the yellow ribbon campaign from several different angles.

Other Related Events

Several other recent events assisted in the success of the bond referendum campaign and the overall grant project. Just prior to the recruitment of the Public Relations Committee members in February a Community Goals Conference sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce was held on the MSU campus. "Unity in Community" included an opening prayer breakfast on Wednesday prior to the Saturday 9 a.m.-3 p.m. meeting. Morning break-out sessions included topics of Education, Crime, Race Relations, Recreation, Economic Development, and Youth Services. All of these areas are very related to the goals of the grant project and the bond referendum. Information from this meeting was used as research by those involved to determine areas to target during the grant effort and the bond issue campaign.

Also, during the past summer the community voted for a 2% restaurant tax to build a sportsplex facility, to promote tourism, and to support economic development. Many of those who worked on this campaign were asked to help with the school bond referendum campaign. Lessons learned from the 2% effort were used as research for the bond campaign.

In addition, approximately 18 months prior to the school bond campaign one of the largest local churches implemented a capital campaign fund drive to build a family life center. A development specialist was hired by the church to work with committees formed at the church to plan and coordinate a campaign to encourage church members' support with their votes to approve the building project and by pledging money and other assets over several years. The church campaign was a great success and the building is almost completed. Many of those working on this church campaign, including the superintendent of the schools and the grant principal investigator, also worked on the school bond referendum campaign. In fact, in one meeting the superintendent explained how many of the elements in the campaigns were similar. A church member, who had been asked to work on the bond campaign, exclaimed, "I wondered why so many people from the Methodist Church were here! Now I know."

Other Activities of Principal Investigator

Prior to the grant implementation, the principal investigator met with the Chamber Quality Council, outlining highlights of the proposal. Because of this exposure to the activities of the Chamber, the principal investigator joined the organization in January. This affiliation has led to his involvement with the Chamber Education Committee and the Chamber Communication Committee. The Education Committee went on record as supporting the bond issue prior to his involvement. The committee now is focusing on assisting the county district determine their future needs.

In addition to the general overall local media support and reporting of the grant award and the bond issue elements, the principal investigator was asked in December to begin writing a guest column every fifth Sunday for the local newspaper. This invitation occurred after conversations

with the editor and publisher directly after being interviewed for a story about the grant award. Several columns throughout the January-May semester addressed the schools either directly or indirectly.

The principal investigator is also an officer in Parents for Public Schools and a member and former officer in PTA. He helps coordinate general and bond newspaper advertising produced by PPS. These affiliations assisted in coordinating the efforts for overall support and specifically bond issue promotions of these groups.

Summary and Results

Overall outcomes from the grant specifically have been very beneficial. Surveys conducted with students, parents, school personnel, and community members produced a wealth of data. Some of this information already helped officials target messages during the bond campaign. This will also provide baseline information for further studies conducted by the district for years to come.

A telephone Response Line was initiated and is still being used by the district. This avenue for incoming communication, 324-ABCD, provides an opportunity for various publics to make suggestions, comments or complaints to the district through use of an answering machine 24 hours a day. Flyers were produced and distributed to encourage students, parents, school personnel, and community members to use the Response line. In addition, the telephone number was placed on surveys completed during the semester with students, parents, school personnel, and community. Numerous feature stories and "hard" news stories were submitted by the interns and later published or aired by area media. In addition, two district-wide newsletters were

completed by interns. District administrators plan to continue some form of district-wide newsletter starting with the next school year.

All of these elements of the grant were promoted thoroughly through newspaper articles, radio interviews, television interviews, and in numerous meetings throughout the semester. The different elements were looked upon as different pieces to the same large puzzle.

The overall outcomes from the related bond issue were also very positive: the vote passed approximately 65% to 35%, and many who were previously apathetic or uninvolved have become more supportive of the local public schools after their participation in the bond campaign. However, there was some vocal opposition to the bond issue from several local groups and individuals. This included officers of a civil rights group, one who stated that the schools had racial inequalities, and another who wanted consolidation with the county district before he would support the new tax. Also, one alderman bought advertisements in the local newspaper stating his opposition to the bond issue because it would raise taxes that he said were already too high. There was also some underlying opposition from the local private school parents, some of whom did not want their taxes raised for a school system their children did not attend. However, many involved with the bond campaign believed many, if not most, of the private school parents and officials supported the bond issue because of the overwhelming positive impact it would have on business and long-term economic development. Some business owners were also opposed to the bond issue and would not give their support, but there was not an outward organized effort to defeat the proposal. Even though there was opposition, the collaborative efforts of the grant committee and the bond referendum committees have proven vital to the long-term success of the Starkville School District.

Throughout this campaign, attributes of public schools were emphasized, but any problems were also discussed, with solving those problems as a coordinating function. Although the local public schools are of high quality, there needs to be better two-way communication between all schools and various publics. Image is not everything concerning public schools, but even high quality programs will be misunderstood if not explained thoroughly. A multi-faceted approach should provide win-win situations for all groups involved.

Grant committee members agreed from the start that the Starkville School District was excellent overall, and that many of the misconceptions of various publics were due to lack of information. Increased outgoing positive information was one attained goal of the grant projects and the bond campaign. The other major goal of encouraging more feedback and general communication from all publics also was a successful outcome of these efforts.

The school district provided $5,000 of the $11,028 used in the grant through matching funds. Money used to specifically promote the bond issue was raised from private donors. Some school officials, including the superintendent, saw the need for school public relations prior to the grant implementation and bond issue campaign, and the district has been moving toward emphasizing the area more. However, after this public relations effort through "A Model Community Marketing and Communication Program: Building Coalitions for Public Education," more school district officials, parents, and community leaders have now expressed an interest in continuing many of these efforts by having a professional coordinate public relations full time. The continuing collaboration of many of these publics enlisted during the past year should continue as a one tool to assist local school officials to proactively determine the pulse of the community. The momentum evident in this reservoir of goodwill enhanced by the grant project

and continued through the bond campaign should be maintained and continued. These efforts should not be stopping points but merely starting points for more effective school-community relations.

Recommendations for Developing College/School Collaborations

Prior to Implementation

- Gain support of school superintendent and other key college and school administrators.
- Determine major community leaders and enlist support.
- Organize meetings to outline general duties and roles.
- Work with other organizations to provide grant money for expenses.

After Implementation

- Use as part of an overall continuing public relations program.
- Implement ideas of volunteers. Do not have input and disregard.
- Report results internally and selectively to external publics.

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